

How to prepare for a hyperactive hurricane season

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A house in Houston, Texas, with windows boarded up ahead of Hurricane Ike in 2008. Credit: Wikimedia/[Sirtrentalot](#)

It could be a busy hurricane season in the Atlantic this year. Between June 1 and November 30, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration (NOAA) [forecasts](#) above-average activity, with a likely range of 14 to 21 named storms, of which 6 to 10 could become hurricanes, including 3 to 6 major hurricanes (Category 3, 4 or 5).

Jeffrey Schlegelmilch is the director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia Climate School. In the Q&A below, he explains what the forecast means, who should be prepared, and how you can get ready to ride out the possible storms to come.

What does an 'above-average' forecast like this mean? Should we be worried?

On the one hand, it's really important to pay attention to and signifies an increased likelihood of exposure to a disaster. That being said, we've seen some very devastating hurricanes in years that have been below average in terms of the number of hurricanes. It really only takes one to hit you, and the [hurricane](#) doesn't care if it's a busy year or not. So it's definitely an opportunity to pay more attention, but I would say that every year we need to pay close attention.

Who is at risk?

A lot of times we think of risk as being close to the coast. But just because your house isn't on a beach, it doesn't mean you're not in a [coastal area](#). You could be 100 miles inland and still experience very significant rainfall from hurricane remnants.

We have to kind of disassociate ourselves from terms like "hurricane" and "Category 5" as a measure of risk, because that's primarily based on [wind speed](#), whereas much of the damage typically comes from flooding and storm surge. One of the most significant storms in memory is Sandy, which was not a hurricane when it made landfall near New York. And

Ida made landfall last year in Louisiana, but its impacts stretched for thousands of miles with severe storms. So we have to pay attention to the forecasts and we have to pay attention to the warnings, too, and take measures to protect our families and businesses.

It's also important to note that those who are already vulnerable—who are disproportionately burdened along areas of health, economics, transportation, housing, minority status, etc.—see that vulnerability grow after disasters. Organizations have generally gotten really good at identifying this and are taking some steps to try and close the gap on this, but we're not there yet. And so equity needs to really be a major focus of resilience, response, and recovery.

What can individuals do to prepare?

First and foremost, it comes down to some basic preparedness strategies and listening to local authorities.

For individuals and families, we have some resources on our website, including the Preparedness Wizard and the Five Steps to Preparedness. There are also resources from Ready.gov and the Red Cross. It really comes down to food, water, shelter, communications plans with your family, special needs, medication, young children and pets, things like that. You could be in a situation where you either have to leave quickly and you want to make sure you have everything, or where you're going to have to stay in one place for an extended period of time without access to some of the things that you're used to, like maybe roads and electricity.

Through FEMA, our center also delivers trainings on post-disaster housing and post-disaster economic recovery, including what programs could be available in the aftermath of a disaster. These could tell you what to look out for. And we have some courses on financial literacy for

individuals and businesses. For this hurricane season, it might be too late to, say, improve your credit score, but it may not be too late to put some money into savings or look at insurance policies and things like that.

What about preparedness at the state and local level?

In addition to the FEMA trainings, the National Center for Disaster Preparedness offers a variety of resources to help communities and states with planning for disasters, recovery, and resilience building. For example, for organizations that work with children, we have our Resilient Children/Resilient Communities Toolbox, which offers procedures, training, and guidance to help build child-focused community resilience to disasters.

It's really important for communities and states to lean into their preparedness messages and plans, but also to acknowledge that a lot of people right now don't have as much money as they used to have, for a variety of reasons, including inflationary pressures. The dollar isn't going as far in terms of preparedness, so it's pushing people into greater vulnerability. This can affect their baseline level of preparedness, as well as the availability of donations and volunteers, and the cost of materials for sheltering, for feeding people and things like that. We could potentially see a need for more aid, and we could potentially see that aid being more expensive than it typically is.

Another concern is that we do still have the pandemic going on, and we're in a very gray area with pandemic control measures. If you were opening up a shelter in the summer of 2020, there were very strict protocols for keeping people distanced, for wearing masks, and things like that. Nowadays, I fear it could be a political decision. And some of the states that are most vulnerable, like Florida, have been the most resistant to pandemic measures. I worry a lot about the potential for politics to impact sound planning and response strategy.

The advice that I would give to states and organizations of all sizes is to make sure that you have contingencies for COVID-19 infection, as well as other infections that could spread in a sheltering environment. If not, it could be a recipe for a public health disaster on the heels of a meteorological disaster.

Is there anything that could be done in terms of preparedness at the federal level?

Groups like FEMA, the Red Cross, and state and local emergency management agencies are preparing for hurricanes every year. I think a forecast like this year's raises the blood pressure a little bit, but there's still a lot of uncertainty around what's going to happen, when it's going to happen and where it's going to hit.

FEMA has been under increasing strain in terms of the number of declared disasters and the staff available to respond to those disasters. The simple answer would be to put more money into the system. While that is a somewhat correct answer, it's not a very sustainable answer. The only way to get ahead of it is to invest more in resilience and preparedness.

Some federal programs, like the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program, do have resilience themes built in. We won't see the payoff from those longer-term investments in this hurricane season, but five or ten years down the road, they could save a lot of lives and money.

Is there such a thing as being over prepared for a disaster?

When we talk about meteorological forecasts and storm tracks and things

like that, there's a lot of uncertainty, yet a lot of decisions still have to be made. We're never going to have all of the information we want, so we need to make sure that we create options for what we can do, understanding that sometimes it is going to help us avoid catastrophe, and other times it's going to be an expensive reaction to a storm that ends up taking a turn right instead of left, so it is not as bad as forecasted. It doesn't mean that the decision was wrong. It's all part of a healthy preparedness and response process.

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